

Dante Alighieri
Inferno, Canto I

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A Triple-Rhyme Translation
of the *Divine Comedy*

BY
SIDNEY GUNN, A.M.

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A TRIPLE-RHYME TRANSLATION OF THE FIRST CANTO OF DANTE'S *DIVINE COMEDY*

Translating is a difficult task under any circumstances, and translating the *Divine Comedy* into the English equivalent of the Italian "terza rima" is beset with so many special difficulties that it has come to be regarded as an undertaking no more likely to succeed than an attempt to square the circle would be. English, in the first place, is so much poorer in rhymes than Italian that the verse-scheme Dante employs has never been adapted to it with any success. Then, the eleven-syllable verse does not exist in English except as a variant of those of ten or twelve syllables, and the regular dissyllabic rhymes of Italian have either a ludicrous or a sentimental suggestion in our language, something that unfits them for use in rendering a poet to whom both qualities are entirely foreign. Besides this, Dante's thought is often difficult to render even in prose, so involved and complex is it, and yet it has a distinctiveness about it that is lost by a paraphrase or a free rendering; so that the translator into triple rhyme must make that un-English measure fully as flexible and manageable as unshackled prose, for in it he must not only reproduce the composition of one of the world's greatest writers, in a language naturally better adapted to its form than English, but he must also give an air of naturalness and ease to many strange locutions that Dante permitted himself to use for the sake of rhyme or emphasis.

The difficulties of making a translation of the *Divine Comedy* in the metre of the original were sufficient to discourage Byron, who tried his hand at the famous Francesca da Rimini scene in the fifth canto of the "Inferno," but several men of less distinction have carried the task to completion, although none has done so with any great success, and of them all only Dean Plumptre is recognized as having made any sort of contribution to Dante literature. Lately it would seem that the need of a satisfactory verse translation has been widely felt, for in the year 1911 alone, at least two metrical versions of Dante's masterpiece have been issued by English publishers.

Of these one is in what purports to be eleven-syllable verse without rhyme, while the other is rhymed in tercets containing, for the most part, lines of ten syllables, but feminine endings frequently occur. The translation here presented was begun several years ago as an exercise rather than as a serious literary undertaking, but it has been continued as far as the completion of the "Inferno," at first because of the fascination of the task, and afterwards as a result of the encouragement of friends. It aims to translate Dante as literally as possible in language that is free enough from inversions and distortions to be readable and intelligible without painful study. Epithets and additions merely for the sake of rhyme have been avoided, and all Dante's strong lines, as well as those that — like, "All hope abandon, ye who enter here" — have passed into English, are retained literally, or in the form in which they are known. Only masculine rhymes are employed, for the reasons mentioned above, and also to give the uniformity of line that is characteristic of the original.

The *Divine Comedy* consists of three divisions: "Hell," "Purgatory," and "Paradise"; and of these "Purgatory" and "Paradise" have each thirty-three cantos, while "Hell" has thirty-four, an extra one being added to set the scene as well as to make the total number of cantos in the entire work one hundred.

In the first canto Dante is described as starting up to find himself "at the middle of the road of life" — his thirty-fifth year, three score and ten years being the normal allotment of life — in the wood of sin and worldiness, into which he has unconsciously strayed as a consequence of wandering from the direct road of virtue while his spiritual faculties were lulled to sleep by his absorption in worldly undertakings. When he awakes he tries to return to righteousness — the mountain whose summit is lighted up by the sun, the symbol of reason. The three beasts that oppose his ascent — the lion, the leopard, and the wolf — are symbols of sins that infest the human heart, and they have been interpreted many different ways; but the main tendency in the past was to regard them as typifying pride, luxury, and avarice respectively, while now there is a disposition to look on the lion as violence, the leopard as fraud, and the wolf as in-

continence. The fact is, that all these things and many more are symbolized by the beasts, for they represent sins both in Dante and in those about him, and they have a general implication as well as a particular reference to Dante's own career so far as it represented what is universal to humanity. Thus the lion may be said to stand for pride in Dante himself — his besetting sin—for the violence of worldly conflict that begets violence in those who suffer from it, and for the political coalition that took from Dante his peace of mind by unjustly depriving him of his home and his good name. The leopard stands for a group of more insidious vices, those begotten by luxury and artificial refinement — physical and moral infidelity. The wolf represents grosser passions and lusts than the leopard,— physical sins of a coarser type and treachery begotten of the brute nature rather than the intellect. Vergil typifies human reason; but he also symbolizes the fact that his works were, in Dante's opinion, the chief sources of enlightenment during the Middle Ages, as well as the further fact that Vergil was the chief influence on Dante's own intellectual development; for through him Dante learned to comprehend the universe visible to the intellect, the necessary preliminary to earthly happiness and to an understanding of the vaster universe that theology discloses to the eye of faith.

The time of the vision is said to have been from Good Friday to Easter Sunday in the year 1300, hence Dante says the sun was mounting with the same stars that accompanied him when Divine Love first moved the heavenly bodies; for according to theological teaching, the creation took place when the stars are in the position they occupy at Easter.

The only other matter in the first canto that requires mention is the "feltro" passage. This is merely a prophecy put in the mouth of Vergil to the effect that Italy would some day have a redeemer who would purge her politics of the brutal selfishness that characterized them. The prophecy is purposely couched in terms that have no specific meaning, and any attempts to make it refer to a definite person are merely illustrations of how incapable the average mind is of appreciating anything that does not have a very limited and personal application.

INFERNO I

When at the middle point upon life's way
 I found myself within a forest drear,
 For I was from the rightful path astray.
 Ah, it to picture is a task severe,—
 5 That savage wood both rough and cruel sore,
 Which in the thought awakes again my fear!
 So bitter is it death is little more;
 But of the good which there I found to treat,
 I shall what else I saw therein tell o'er.
 10 How there I entered I cannot repeat,
 So wrapped in slumber was I in that part
 Where from the pathway true I turned my feet.
 But when I came unto an hillside's start,—
 The place at which that valley first divides
 15 Which with its terrors had so pricked my heart,—
 I lifted up my eyes and saw its sides
 Already clothe that planet's brilliancy
 Which men aright through every pathway guides.
 Then stilled became the fear in some degree
 20 The lake within my heart contained always
 Throughout that night I passed so piteously,
 And as a man, with breath that toiling stays,
 Who from the sea doth on the shore arrive,
 Turns round upon the dreadful main to gaze;
 25 So then my mind, which fear ceased not to drive,
 Turned back its vision o'er that pass to run
 Which no one ever yet had left alive.
 When I some rest had given my frame fordone,
 Once more across the desert slope I went,
 30 My firm foot being e'er the lower one.
 But lo, almost on starting the ascent,
 I saw a leopard, quick and full of grace,
 With hide upon which differing colors blent.
 Depart it would not from before my face,
 35 But so impeded all advance of mine
 That oft I thought my footsteps to retrace.
 The sun was just beginning then to shine,
 And with those stars he was ascending there
 Which his companions were when Love Divine
 40 Impelled to motion first those objects fair;
 So that to hope the best it was my right,
 From that fierce beast of vari-colored hair,
 Both from the hour and from the season bright;
 But not so much but that I was dismayed,
 45 When suddenly a lion met my sight,
 Which seemingly its way against me made
 With head erect and ravening to feed,
 So that the very air appeared afraid.

And then a wolf I saw, which with all greed
 Seemed laden, from its dreadful meagreness,
 Which wretched lives had many made to lead.
 This latter brought on me such heaviness,
 So fearful was the aspect that she had,
 That I lost hope the height e'er to possess.
 And as a man who when he gains is glad,
 But comes the time when losses persecute,
 In all his thoughts doth weep and groweth sad ;
 So I became before that peaceless brute,
 Which, ever as it slowly towards me crept,
 Me back was thrusting where the sun is mute.
 While thus I towards a lower region swept,
 My eyes on one before me there I placed,
 Who weak appeared from silence long time kept.
 When I beheld him in that mighty waste :
 "Have mercy on me," unto him I cried,
 "If thou be shade or man by flesh embraced."
 "Man am I not, but was," he then replied,
 "And parents had I from the Lombard state,
 And Mantuans by birth on either side.
Sub Julio I was born, although 'twas late,
 And lived at Rome beneath Augustus good,
 While yet the false and lying gods were great.
 Poet was I, and sang the hardihood
 Shown by Anchises' son, who came from Troy
 When haughty Ilion in ashes stood.
 But why returnest thou where ills destroy ?
 Why dost thou not ascend the lovely mount
 Which is the source and cause of every joy ?"
 "Now art thou Vergil, and indeed that fount
 Which doth so great a stream of speech expand ?"
 I said, while shame did o'er my forehead mount,
 "O light and honor of the poet band,
 Let me avail the love and honor now
 With which so oft thy volume I have scann'd !
 My master and my author, too, art thou :
 Thou art the only one from whom I take
 The fair style that doth me with fame endow.
 Behold the beast ; she me to turn doth make :
 Aid me against her, famous sage I pray ;
 She makes my very veins and pulses quake."
 "It thee befits to take another way,"
 He answered, when me weeping he beheld,
 "If thou wouldst from this savage spot away ;
 Because that beast which thee to cry compelled
 Lets not her paths by others be traversed,
 But hinders them until them death hath felled.

Her nature is so wicked and accurst
 That she can never sate her greedy will,
 But gorging makes her hungrier than at first.
 100 She wives with many beasts, and greater still
 Their multitude shall grow, until the hound
 Shall come that her with agony shall kill.
 He nourished shall not be by gold nor ground,
 But wisdom, love, and manfulness supreme ;
 105 And 'twixt two feltros shall his home be found.
 He shall that humble Italy redeem
 For which the maid Camilla's death took place ;
 Turnus', Euryalus', Nisus' wounds did stream.
 He forth from every city shall her chase,
 110 Till she once more shall back to Hell be brought,
 Whence Envy her did first of all displace.
 So I it for thy betterment have thought
 That thou shouldst follow, and that I should guide,
 Till thou those realms eternal shalt have sought
 115 Where thou shalt by the desperate shrieks be tried
 Of all those ancient spirits, torture-rent,
 By each of whom the second death is cried.
 Then shalt thou see the ones that are content
 To stay within the fire, for they believe
 120 That they will sometime to the blest be sent ;
 To mount to whom, if thou shouldst wish conceive,
 A spirit shall conduct more fit than I,
 I shall to her entrust thee when I leave :
 For that great Emperor who rules on high,
 125 Because I did his righteous laws disdain,
 Permits not me his city to draw nigh.
 His rule is everywhere, but there his reign,
 There is his city and his lofty seat :
 O happy he elected it to gain !"
 130 And I to him : " Poet, I thee entreat
 By that true God who was unknown to thee,
 That this and greater ill I may not meet,
 Do thou, as thou hast promised to, lead me
 So I may look Saint Peter's gate upon,
 135 And those thou say'st endure such agony."
 Then he set out, and I behind kept on.

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